UCC Pastors

St. Petersburg

Not long before I received the invitation to spend some time with a group of United Church of Christ pastors in Florida in January, 2013, I read one of the best books I have ever read on the practice of ministry (and like you, I am sure, I have read a lot of them, close to all of them) I had just finished This Odd and Wondrous Calling and it was full of underlining, double underlining, marginalia on most pages – "Amen to that, Martin!" "Oh, , Lillian, you got that right!" – and I thought, "Great, I'll just walk the people who have come from all over the country to Florida in January through this book." But then, horror of horrors, it occurred to me that the co-authors might be there as well. So much for that. Although I have the lingering, nagging sense that rather than listening to me you might better spend your time

sitting in the sun reading Lillian Daniel and Martin Copenhaver, hopefully with something cool and refreshing in your hand.

What in the world of value and relevance do I have to say to a group such as this? Over the years I have read and pondered a lot of books on the church, the state of the church, the relevance of the church, the irrelevance of the church, the decline of the church, the death of the church, the resurrection of the church – and I suspect you have read them all and more.

And I have read everything I could get my hands on about ministry and preaching. And I have read every sermon I could find and learned a lot about preaching – from Tillich and Barth and Niebuhr, from Paul Scherer to Ernie Campbell to Bill Coffee to James Farles. From Frederick Buechner to Barbara Brown Taylor to Lillian Daniel. And I know you have read them all as well.

And I have read, and so have you, all the historical and sociological and demographic analysis from Robert Bellah to to Robert Putnam and .

So what is it that I know that you don't? What have I done that you have not done? The answer, of course, is that I have retired. In a sense, I have finished the course, made it to the finish line of a marathon that began long ago and ended where the Presbytery of Chicago voted to anoint me with a new title I can now affix to my name, H.R., Honorably Retired.

The theme of this is about "Seasons of Preaching: Evolution of Preaching in a Pastor's Life" with the intriguing implication in there that there are seasons, different occasions and movement, an evolving in the practice of preaching over the long haul. So, at the risk of boring you to tears, that is what I will talk about – seasons, evolution and ending, retiring.

Beginnings: Over the many years I suppose I have been asked one question more than any other: How did you get into this business? How, and perhaps more importantly, why, did you decide to be a minister? I loved Lillian's confession that deciding to be a minister is not simple, certainly not a over and done thing. I graduated from college, Franklin & Marshall, one of yours, by the way, insofar as any of these wonderful old colleges are still related to the ecclesiastical and theological tradition that founded them. Franklin & Marshall was an Evangelical and Reformed School, part, of course, of the UCC lineage. My major was Government/Political Science and I had no idea in the world what I wanted to do next. I always was intrigued by ministry, by the ministers of my home church who were smart, energetic, and interesting, but I spent four years of college staying as far away as I could for pre-

theologians, who seemed so certain, so smug, and didn't seem to be having much fun, at least by my broadening definition of fun. The Korean War was over. Nobody ever heard of Vietnam. Not many people were being drafted. I had a few years of Air Force ROTC and many of my peers moved from college to OCS and the military. It was an option for me which I explored and came close to taking. Other friends were interviewing for jobs so I did that too and landed an interview with IBM. I looked at law schools. And in the middle of this junior and senior floundering, had my annual visit with the faculty member who was my assigned advisor. By luck, or Providence, and it seems more clear now that it was not luck, my advisor was a Professor of Religion, G. Wayne Glick. Glick was a great guy, affable, pipe smoking, a gracious, comfortable human being. When I presented my dilemma of what to do next in response to his

question, he said: “You should take a year off at a place where you can continue to ask the questions you are really asking, about life and purpose and meaning. You should go to the University of Chicago Divinity School for a year. I’m pretty sure you could get a fellowship of some kind. And if you don’t like it, there is always the Cubs!” He remains a hopeless Cubs fan to this day – as do I. I was stunned. “I don’t want to be a minister!” I said. “Oh, that’s alright,” he responded. “They don’t care about that at Chicago.” So, I went – we went, we were married by then – with that utterly flimsy sense of purpose. (I was not yet using words like vocation and call.)

There is a UCC connection here as well. The Federated Theological Faculty at the University of Chicago was a brave experiment in ecumenical theological education: four schools, The Divinity School, Meadville, Disciples

Divinity House, and Chicago Theological Seminary – a UCC school – shared one faculty and one curriculum. I entered through CTS – and a few months after we arrived the FTF imploded and students had to choose one of the four schools – which became independent autonomous entities once again. Still suspicious of the concept of “seminary,” I chose the Divinity School.

The idea of call, of being called to this, or any business, I suppose is complex. When people ask us how we got into this business they are expecting, I think, a fairly simple answer, maybe even something rapturous an dramatic: a clap of thunder, a voice in the dark, Peter Marshall! Marta Further – in the throes of a near death experience, terrified, offering God a deal – let me live and I’ll become one of your guys. The question always made me uncomfortable, not only because nothing like that ever happened to me, but because I now see, from

the perspective of decades, that for me this decisive event was an interview which I flunked.

Two-thirds of the way through that first year I had pretty much decided that I needed to do something else. My decisions was heavily influenced, if truth were told, by visits with a college classmate who had taken a job with IBM and who was doing very well financially and loved telling me about it. He, too, was married, living in a real split level house, driving a new Chevrolet Impala. For the first and certainly not the last time I experienced the very real and compelling appeal of mammon. So I began exploring and decided I would become a school administrator. A brand new PhD program was opening at Johns Hopkins with generous full rides, including housing for a select entering class of 15 or so. I applied. Johns Hopkins responded with interest and an interview was scheduled. I was to meet the interviewer in a United

Airlines passenger lounge at Midway Airport. I put on my only suit, drove to midway, and met the Johns Hopkins interviewer. We sat and talked and of all things, in the middle of the interview I started to be distracted, bored, my eyes caught by arriving and departing planes out the window. The interview ended. I returned home to wait for what I was absolutely certain would be my acceptance letter and generous financial package. The letter came. It was a rejection letter. “Thank you very much for your interested. We think your obvious gifts will lead you in another directions, etc., etc.” At the close was a handwritten note from the interview.

Mr. Buchanan,

I enjoyed our conversation. But, in the middle of it I detected a lack of true interest on your part. Perhaps you ought to give more thought to your future.

Very best wishes.

I was crushed. If truth be told, I had never been rejected for anything. And over the years that incident has become for the occasion of call; at the very least, the road bump that sent me back to the task of struggling to discern the purpose of my life – what I now know, still reluctantly, as God's purpose.

When people ask, I want to tell them but never do, to read Psalm 139

Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there,
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.

or Francis Thompson, The Hound of Heaven

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
   I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
   Of my own mind; and in the midst of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.

From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.

Sue and I had been attending the First Presbyterian Church of Chicago during that first year, a six block walk down Kimbark Avenue from Hyde Park. First Church, the oldest Chicago congregation (although the Methodists try to prove that they were first) – the Church of the Armours and Swifts – now found itself surrounded by a neighborhood that had changed and was now entirely African American, and . It was an intentionally inter-racial church, “integrated” was the term we sued. I had never seen anything like it. Co-pastors, one white, Charles Leber, and one black,

Ulysses Buck-Blakeley. I was entranced. My own sensitivity to racial injustice was being awakened and amplified – and here was a church doing something amazing, something that would astonish my own parents if they could see it.

That summer – by now we had a baby – I worked in construction during the day and as a janitor at night to make ends meet. It was not pleasant, certainly not for Sue and our new daughter. Walking through the cloisters at CTS I saw a notice on the bulletin board: “Wanted. Student Pastor. Dyer Union Church. $50 per week and free use of the parsonage.” Well – the heavens did open and the spirit did descend – the free use of the parsonage is what did it. I called the telephone number, we drove 25 miles south of Chicago to Dyer, talked with a committee and was offered the job and took it.

The Season of Preaching – I'm not sure what season it was – maybe February/March in Chicago, the sun hasn't shone for months, what snow there is is gray, there is no sign of life, energy, beauty to be seen anywhere. Everything is dormant, waiting. I had no idea what I was getting in to. For my first sermon in September 1960, I cobbled together everything I had learned. I talked about the Greeks, the Hebrew people and their wandering and exiles, I talked about Egypt and Babylon and Assyria – and Jesus of Nazareth – the Christ Event. I used words like Weltenschaung, Heilsgeschicte – and concluded with a pitch for civil rights. For some reason nobody walked out. In fact, they all smiled. I think they were charmed by my pretty wife and our cute baby and they probably heard all this stuff before.

That afternoon – still full of myself after that amazing performance, a terrible thought occurred. I have to do

that again – in seven days. And that is what I did every seven days, from the first Sunday in September, 1960 until the last Sunday in January, 2012 – 52 years.

How did I learn to do it? I'm still not sure I have, still look for a new idea, a new approach. I heard sermons all my life but can't say that I listened. One minister in our home church, Leslie Van , a WWI decorated veteran, wounded in the Battle of the Bulge, graduate of Yale Divinity School, talked about current events, made people uncomfortable by bringing the McCarthy era – Red-scare and race and ecumenism into the pulpit. People didn't like it much, but it was an eye opener for me. I did listen to Blakely and because they, too, talked about the world and what was happening outside the church.

But preparing and preaching sermons: I had not had a class or read a book – or thought much about it. So I

gave myself a crash course. I began to read sermons, any sermon I could find. Books of sermons, collected sermons, individual . I went to see Phil Anderson, Dean of CTS and he suggested that I look at Paul Tillich, The Shaking of the Foundations, Karl Barth, Deliverance to the Captives, sermons he preached to the inmates in the Basel Jail, and he showed me how to subscribe to the Protestant Hour and he did loan me a book or two on preaching.

So I read and read and read – while I was studying theology and church history and New Testament, and preparing to sit down on Friday night and crank out something for Sunday. And I listened – for the first time, intentionally to every sermon I could – weekly in Bond Chapel as Divinity School faculty took turns preaching. Bernie Melaud, Nathan Scott, Arstberg, Marcus Barth, J. Coertt Rylarsdau, and Joe Sittler. Sittler – who

salted every lecture and every sermon with memorized passages of TS Eliot, Walt Whitman, and Gerard Manley Hopkins, and wonderfully human anecdotes for life on campus and in Hyde Park. Ernest Campbell was particularly helpful – he later was the preaching minister at Riverside Church.

In retrospect, I understand that I apprenticed myself to great preachers. I watched how they crafted sentences, used words and phrases. I listened in Bond Chapel and was deeply impressed and moved by the way these superb, internationally respected scholars studied, interpreted and proclaimed gospel on the campus of the University of Chicago, how – in robes and stoles - these academics brought together the life of the mind and the life of the heart and spirit.

I suppose I imitated them – all of them – the rest of my life. There was my course in preaching at the Divinity

School. For those few of us who were going to become church ministers after graduations there was a spring quarter course called “Ministry.” And one part of that once course was on preaching. We each preached a sermon to the class which then continued. It was a terrible experience.

Early on I learned that preaching is hard work and requires disciplined commitment, that if I thought about it ahead of time, in the middle of a week of lectures, reading, writing papers and driving 25 miles each way every day between Dyer and Hyde Park – if I did a little thinking and planning, things would go a little better when I shut that door to the study – it wasn’t a study, it was a tiny guest bedroom where I had a piece of plywood on two carpenter horses and what Chicago students liked to call their “library,” in my case, about a dozen books – things went better in there on Friday

night when I cranked out something for Sunday – if I had thought about it ahead of time.

Two things happened. One: I discovered the lectionary – I had not known there was such a thing. There it was, texts for each Sunday, Psalms, Old Testament, New Testament, Epistles. Two: I had a summer vacation, an unheard-of luxury. So I began, very modestly at first, a discipline I maintained and refined over the years. I read the lectionary: the four texts for each Sunday for the next few months. I wrote the texts for each Sunday on a piece of paper, and a sentence or two about each. That system evolved over the years to a loose-leaf notebook with a page for each Sunday of the year, and then a file folder for each Sunday. On each page, and later into the file, went ideas the occurred at the time of the first reading of the texts – something a lot, sometimes not much – sometimes nothing (whose idea was it to include

that in the lectionary?) But, for me, m costly, the act of assigning a page or folder to each Sunday of the church year with the appropriate texts for each – was tantamount o opening a file drawer in my mind, a magnetic file drawer that began, mysteriously to attract material – material from what I was reading, seeing in movies, theater, television, material from what I was observing in the world, and in my own life. Into those folders went clippings from newspapers, magazines, and handwritten notes.

Over the years my preparation process began during summer vacation/study became – (and, what other profession affords the incredible luxury of four weeks vacation and two weeks study leave?) It began in the summer, wherever we were – in our parents' homes in Altoona, Pennsylvania, before we could afford to be anywhere else and when grandparents were thrilled to

take over child care…or later, at the ocean, where I walked the beach at dawn, made a pot of coffee and got a few hours of work in before the serious activities of the day began, pancakes, waffles, and castles, foot races, body-surfing. My family – finally – seven of us, always understood the deal, and always respected it.

The weekly process depended totally on that summer discipline. Monday morning: retrieve the file for the next Sunday: read the texts and related collected material: read the commentaries on the chosen texts: take notes: identify a theme or motif: write it all down: stop at 9:00 or 10:00 and enjoy the rest of the day.

Tuesday: review Monday's notes and identify directions the texts are taking and related resources: get the books off the shelves. Go to work at 9:00.

Wednesday, all morning in the study (at home, by the way. I never learned to do sermon preparation in the

space I used for the daily regime at church, even when I tried to shut the door and , my mind kept straying to what was happening outside). Wednesday was for ploughing through resources I had identified from theology, history, literature – taking notes all the while

by which time I had twenty pages of notes. for the rest of the afternoon.

Wednesday evening, a one hour. Reviewed all the notes, red lines, cross out and discard, slash and burn. Make a one page list of the inspirational, relevant material – and – establish some order of priority: this comes first, then this, then this and conclude with that. Bed time.

On a good week the sermon began to write itself during sleep. On a good week I couldn't sleep past 4 or 5 because the sermon was demanding to be written. Thursday morning was for writing; no interruptions, no phone calls, just the idea flow, the related materials, pot of coffee and desk until it was done: 10 pages of hand-written manuscript. Confession: I never made the transition from pen to keyboard . I have absolutely no idea with the vast majority of preacher – and writers- who have and who can think as nimbly and creatively on a computer as they could pushing a pen. More so, in fact, I simply never got it done. I have tried and I am better writing letters with a pen in my hand. It is also why I never entered a pulpit without a manuscript. I dimply don't communicate as well on my feet as I do sitting at a desk. I do not often that as , merely confession.

When in my second church, Lafayette, Indiana, a congregation of almost 450 with a solo pastor and part-time secretary, janitor, choir director and organist, it became clear that I could work 18 hours a day, seven days a week and still not keep up with everything: teach adult Sunday School, lead the youth group, teach confirmation class, watch the budget, make hospital and home calls, recruit new members, shovel the walk --- when it became clear that the only way I could do all of that was to work non-stop and squeeze sermon preparation in around the edges, I talked to an older, wiser mentor, J. Dayton McCarmiels, pastor of Central Presbyterian Church in Lafayette. Dayton said something absolutely true and clear and important. They have called you to preach. They will give you a generous church of their busy lives on Sunday morning. They will

get out of bed and put good clothes on and, in all come to church because of the hope that the preacher will have something important and maybe even useful to say. I have never stopped being amazed at that. More so over the years as church going has become less and less the norm, particularly for …….They come on Sunday morning and do something for us they will do for no one else – they will sit for twenty minutes in silence and listen to us talk. It is truly amazing when you think about it and it is …..at the very least, our taking this as seriously as they do and do everything we can to make the experience worth the time they invest in it.

So, from that moment, I acknowledged that my first responsibility, my central reason for being there, was to preach sermons on Sunday that were worth their time. It was my priority. As such, it was the organizing

principle for the rest of my life. It was then that I developed the weekly rhythm I just described and announced it to the … - which to my surprise and delight thought it was a great idea. Subsequently, I discussed it, refined it with whatever lay leaders were appropriate. It …. Committee. I discovered that there are no lay people who think it is a bad idea that the minister plans to work on his or her sermon.

And to work colleagues, administrative assistants, understanding was clear – no interruptions on Thursday while I am writing, unless the Club of Session is perched on the 90th floor of the Hancock Building threatening to jump, do not call me.

So the sermon, first draft, was done by noon Thursday. For years, dear Sue typed it, then I did for many years. Then, thanks be to God, secretaries, administrative assistants typed and handed it to me before the end of the day Thursday. I read it once and put it aside to ferment – all day Friday, sometimes most of Saturday.

My Saturday evening ritual – I …… to no one. When we were home – which was most Saturday evenings- I made a Beefeater Martini, very dry, up, one olive, carried it – very carefully-- and the sermon manuscript to a comfortable chair and then enjoyed these two artifacts I had created. Sipping the martini and reading slowly, ….the sermon…editing and….scratching or replacing a word here and there.

Up early Sunday – before dawn, pot of coffee in the kitchen and then preach it –right there – preach it to the cabinets and stove and refrigerator. (For years I took it to the church and in the darkened sanctuary – preached it into the ….) Either place I heard the words hit the air for the first time, heard the sermon, in a sense heard it that way it would be heard, spoken into the air on a Sunday morning. Things became clear in that exercise. So to the study to work it out hard, slash and burn, more material around, research the end, push it, massage, shape it, take it down the street to church and give it one more hard look and then preach it three times and more often than not, change it, edit, expand, contract, between services.

There is nothing much unique here, just the way I came to do it weekly over the years, a modest method for

honoring the call to preach, respecting the investment of time the congregation will make in it.

How do you know if it works? You don’t. When it’s over you are spent, as fragile and vulnerable as you ever will be, hungry for appreciations, some affirmation, “Good sermon, Rev” from the elderly woman who says it every morning no matter what is preached or what is said. So vulnerable that the absence of appreciation feels like failure, and one negative comment can ruin your entire week. It is so addictive and you and I simply must understand it, even as we are wallowing in it. I love to preach in the South when people cannot say enough about the sermon. “Oh, Mr. Buchanan, that was just about the best sermon I ever heard. Won’t you come back again, soon?” One time I was preaching for the Installation of a friend in a big Southern church,. She

asked me to preach on the Hagar – Ishmail text and I did., emphasizing God's love and care for outsiders, particularly those who are rejected and marginalized by ….., even by the church. I knew I was skating on thin ice. But I knew I had a 4:00 flight back to Chicago. After the sermon the line was forming to shake my hand. People were gracious and effusive "Oh, Mr. Buchanan that was wonderful. Won't you come back soon?" A woman approached, smiling, sweetly, nicely attired, hat, fur, lots of jewelry "Oh, Mr. Buchanan, thank you ever so much for coming all the way down here from Chicago to be with us this morning. I just hated your sermon." I thanked her and off she went and then what she just said registered. It was a memorable and clarifying experience and I have never forgotten it.

The only thing I ….about preaching is that is it hard work, requiring discipline and reading. Read, read, read. Read what the theologians are saying, what they said yesterday and what they are saying today. Read what the ….. are saying; they are ….the best of us to understand the world we live in and the people we are. Read …..and history. Read newspapers and magazines. Read essays and short stories and read poetry. Read the …..Until it's language becomes your language. I could never find a way to read the …., big books of thought during the working schedule. So I saved them for sermon and winter breaks when I could give myself to the rigor a few hours a day. I read The Nature and Destiny of Man every decade and liked it better each time. I worked my way through Douglas John Hall's ….trilogy. I read everything Frederick Buechner and John Updike wrote. I read Barbara Brown Taylor and Bill

Coffin and Fred Craddock and Will Willimon. I read American history, Civil War history, World War II history, biographies, Churchill, Roosevelt, Lincoln, …., anything Doris Kearns Goodwin wrote and Elaine Pagels.

I wrote a Christian Century column once comparing what I read in the summer to my mother's summer discipline of preserving and canning and storing in a cool cellar shelf jars of beans and corn and tomatoes and peaches and peas that we ate all winter.

I came late to poetry but now try to read some every day – to marvel at the careful, inventive use of language, or a particular world..Mary Oliver, Wendell Berry, Updike, one a day, after a Psalm, always.

The highest evolution and ….of preaching in the life of this pastor came in 1985 when I was called to the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago. In that time prime congregations, minister left on what could gently be called a down note and no great scandal and I came to …and respect and admire both of them – who went on to be effective ministers elsewhere. But in both of those churches people were genuinely pleased that I was there, hungry to see me, cheered when I simply showed up. What a gift!

Fourth Presbyterian Chicago. I was only the fourth pastor to be called in a century; my predecessors served for 25, 33 and 23 years; two were Moderators of the General Assembly and my immediate predecessor, Elam Davies, had just been named by a national magazine as

one of the ten best preachers in North America. Elam was from Wales and was, quite simply, an amazing, powerful preacher, poetic, eloquent, dramatic, with not a manuscript or note in sight. The sanctuary lights dimmed and pulpit spot illuminated. Elam stood and stared out into the sanctuary for what seemed like a full minute, leaned into the microphone and whispered: “Men and women: Listen” It was mesmerizing. He sounded for all the world just like Richard Burton doing Hamlet. Elam was also a wise and erudite …, a ….pastor and his steady eloquent preaching, I came to …, kept Fourth Church afloat during the turmoil and chaos of the 60’s and early 70’s.

…..wisdom in the Presbyterian family was that no one could follow Elam Davies, that the next minister would be an uninitiated interim, a sacrificial lamb.

Elam knew it as well. He could not have been more gracious and kind to me. He announced that he would be absent from the church for five years, would do no weddings, funerals or baptisms and he kept to it. I thought five years was unnecessarily long but, God bless him, that was what he did, to the day. Returned on Easter Sunday five years after his retirement, was in his pew every Sunday and could not have been more supportive. Without fail finding his way to me after worship to say something positive and supportive.

Nevertheless – following him was not easy. For one thing, I am not from Walkes, but Altoona, Pennsylvania. For another thing, compared to Elam's homilies – mine was like reading a corporate report. What I thought worked pretty well in Lafayette, Indiana and Columbus,

Ohio, in a central city congregation just didn't seem to work here – and in retrospect, I knew it. I knew I had to pick up my game a bit.

For another thing, Elam's leadership circle to a person just seemed sour. Whatever I suggested, they criticized and from a new way of structuring the working committees, to introducing women as ushers, to opening the chapel to Jewish neighbors, to how to manage the church budget and invested funds. The Board of Trustees particularly was suspicious that if I got my hands on the endowment I would give it all away to the …. Green Legal Aid Society and turn that gorgeous Gothic sanctuary into a homeless shelter. Three things got me through it. First, a spouse who was simply unaffected by all of the nonsense, who listened carefully, patted my arm, poured me a scotch and one for herself

and helped me put it in perspective, that it was a tempest in a teapot and would eventually go away – and it did. Eventually they all quit or died. And finally the first thing I did when I arrived was form a part-time Session Committee on…and put on it the leadership of the pulpit committee that had chosen me. That worked magnificently. They were as interested in me making it as I was and they not only supported and steadied me but offered sound advice and criticism.

Another season of preaching was upon me. I needed to pick up my game. Numbers aren't particularly significant – but to put it in perspective, the sanctuary seats about 1,400 and on Sunday morning it was full. Because of the church's location on Michigan Avenue, there are many visitors and tourists. Maybe 300-400 weekly. It is a unique opportunity.

I did two things. A drama teacher and voice coach in the congregation approached me and invited me to have coffee. “I think I can help you,” she said. Taken aback, I was rude. “I know how to preach. I don’t need help.” “Of course you do,” she said sweetly, “ but I know a little bit about communicating with a large group of people – and it is clear to me, that you don’t. So let’s just talk a little bit. I’ve already talked to the chair of the Personnel Committee and they will pay the bill.”

So I went, a little reluctantly and a lot resentfully. I went weekly for a year to her studio at Roosevelt University Auditorium. Theater Building. We talked and she taught me, of all things, how to breath – in front of a crowd where I was.. and determined and nervous. She taught me how to read out loud – a line of poetry. Before long

she had me bringing the sermon along and preach to her and she critiqued and commented. Gail was enormously helpful.

The other thing I did was call Jim Farkes, at the time Professor of Homiletics at Union Seminary and quite simply the best preacher I had ever heard. “I’d like to learn what you know about preaching,” I told him and for some reason he agreed, invited me to come to Union, sit in his classes and talk one on one, and then attend a preaching workshop he was doing for some Methodists in up state New York. You know Jim. For …..the word is literally…and….the preacher, not just head and voice, but heart and soul and body, muscles and tendons, gut and heart. Now this was all pretty strange to me and very, very uncomfortable. My blue collar, Western Pennsylvania home was loving but not very physical. We

hugged, but not much, certainly not much with Dad. We loved one another, but I'm embarrassed to admit that I never said I love you to my father and to my mother only on her deathbed. So Gospel and Ward for me belonged in my head, my intellect period.

……first presentation was on Testimony and the title alone made me nervous. "If you don't believe it…if you can't find something to let them know that you believe it, why in the world would you assume that they are going to believe it?" he asked. "Uh oh" I thought. Then he said we were going to have "testimony time." One by one we were to stand up in front of the group – there were maybe twenty-five of us – and explain what the Holy Spirit was doing in our lives at that time. Well, I seriously considered backing out. I hadn't testified since my chums coerced me into coming to Baptist Young

People's Union (BYPU) when I was in junior high and it totally transformed me. Somehow, I did it, awkwardly, self consciously, embarrassed, mortified. ….in his following remarks acknowledged how difficult the experience was for all of us. Preaching, he argued, is testimony. It may be more than testimony, but if it is not, it some way, ….to us, the preacher, in some way, ours. Our testimony, it was not preaching and would fall flat.

It was a conversion experience for me. My unexamined …..had always been the sermon was never, ever to be about me. About God, about God's love and ….and expectations, but not me – never. Carefully…explained that the first of these assumptions are true. Sermons are about God, not the preacher. But if it is not yours, and if the people don't see that it is your, it is a corporate

report, a lecture – education and helpful and maybe even entertaining, but not a sermon, not the dialogic conveyance of good news from one person to another or a congregation of others.

I never made personal experiences sermons, as far as possible. I never used the personal pronoun. I struggled with it, but slowly, ever so slowly began to put me, all of me, into preaching, not just my head.

There are dangers here and you know them well: too much of me, my family, my experiences, too intimate, too close, for use of family and grandchildren. So, key the brakes or a list of that reticence I learned at home – “no public displays of affections” – but

yes, a sermon is and must be in some way your personal testimony.

My idea and practice of what we sometimes call “prophetic preaching” has evolved as well. I hope and trust, not as a matter of compromising connection with job security, but as a result of maturing.

I graduated from Divinity School and began ministry the year John F. Kennedy was assassinated. Kennedy’s New Frontier, captivated my imagination at the very time I was reading Bonhoeffer – about worldly Christianity, about faith as living thoroughly in the world, about Christi’s call being an invitation to come and die, and as I was watching and reading Martin Luther King, Jr. began to take religion into the streets. Clergy were

arrested, beaten, set up by the police dogs. People had died and would die. A Presbyterian contemporary of mine, protesting hiring inequalities at a construction site in Cleveland stepped in front of a bulldozer and was crushed to death. Kennedy's book Profiles in Courage was on my desk next to the Bible and the Presbyterian Book of Order. It is a book about politicians in American history who sacrificed reputation and sometimes careers on the basis of acting and voting their conscious, contrary to popular sentiment.

It seemed crystal clear. The preacher should be a prophet and proclaim hard truth regardless of the consequences. A lot of my contemporaries got themselves in trouble. A few were fired. One of my best friends, one of the smartest and best, was not only fired but couldn't find a job and fizzled out.

Somehow, I survived. Sunday after Sunday I let the people of Dyer, Indiana know in no uncertain terms that America was a racist nation, institutional racism was all around us including the church, that they and we are accountable to God for establishing justice and identifying with those who were denied justice – at the time that meant African-American people – of which there were none in my community. Somehow, I survived.

Again, I think it was because they loved my wife and cute babies – now there were two.

The only suffering my outspokenness caused me was being turned down for a job I wanted at the time but which in retrospect would have been disastrous.

A position opened up in a new church development in a wealthy lakeside suburb of Gary, when the steel industry was booming. The brand new manse was nestled between sand dunes not far from the lakeshore. They showed us the manse first. I had never been in a brand new house before. The foyer – I had never been in a foyer before – I'm not sure I knew what a foyer was – the foyer in this manse had a marble floor surrounded by mirrors and more marble. The Spirit began to move. We were living in a cracker box in Dyer, a pre-fab on a cement slab, with a furnace that leaked oil and a septic system that didn't work when it rained. And then they told me about the Pontiac. The local Pontiac dealer was a church member and provided a new car every year for the pastor. So a new Pontiac and that house and a lot more money than I was making and the Spirit was moving mightily.

During the following interview they asked if I would ever participated in a demonstration like the ones that were happening in downtown Gary. Would I let myself be arrested? Would I lie down in front of a bulldozer like that Presbyterian minister in Cleveland? The image of the new Pontiac began to fade a bit, and the marble foyer. I didn't want to be too hard on them. There were millions like them – and changes were coming to them that would overturn their comfortable little world. I said that I couldn't really answer the question. That there are times when we have to make hard choices and listen to our conscience and heart and our sense of what Christ calls us to do and be. I said I couldn't promise never to participate in a demonstration, or, God forbid, lie down in front of a bulldozer. It was over. What air that was in the room left. The conversation went on, not much

longer, they thanked me and I received the “thanks but no thanks” letter the next day. It hurt at the time, but it was nothing really and would have been a terrible match.

A few years later, in Lafayette, Indiana, I got in trouble when a few of us got together and decided to ask the city to remove one of those little cast iron hitching posts, a figure of an African American boy in a livery outfit. It stood in front of a fire station at a prominent five-way intersection and the fire department loved it. We told the City Council that it was the worst kind of racial stereotype, offensive to black people and to many whites as well. Well, the reaction was amazing. It made the front page of the paper. People took a very dim view of my participation and later a clergy demonstrator at the

city hall to advocate for the foundation of a Human Relations Council.

I didn’t pay much of a price for any of this but I did learn some things about prophetic preaching.

The first was that Amos didn’t have to deal with a resident congregation after the thundered about “

of Bashaan” and justice flowing down like a river. Amos didn’t have to deal with a Board of Trustees or a Church Council or an economically and socially diverse community as a parish pastor does. I learned that while sometimes you have to say things and do things that will make some people angry enough to walk out on you and the whole enterprise – you simply have to do it. But that hurts, too, and even though you must do you must also

be a pastor to the person who was offended and your owe him or her personal time, one on one time, to listen to him or her and to have the opportunity to explain why this issue is so important to you and why you did what you did.

I learned from something Ernie Campbell said once that while you may have ideas to share with the Secretary of State, or the Attorney General or the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, it is not likely that those people will be in the pews on Sunday. I learned to remember who would be hearing my prophetic pronouncements.

And I learned, most important of all, that people will receive prophetic preaching to the degree that they know the prophet as their pastor, one who is there for

them always, one who will drop whatever he or she is doing to be with them, one who loves them. I learned that the preacher needs to confess that he or she needs to hear a prophetic word, too: that he/she struggles with the issue, that he/she doesn't want to have to change his/her mind and behave differently. People need to know that we are vexed, challenged, by the prophetic word as much as they are. They need to hear us say, before we pronounce as "Thus saith the Lord," that I've been thinking about this, worrying about it, with it, and I am uncomfortable too – but after all my pondering and praying, here is what I believe must be said and done, not because I am a card-carrying Democrat or Republican, but because I am convinced there is a word from God in this issue and how we respond to it.

The season we are in now, all of us, is quite unlike any season that has been around for a long time, certainly not in our generation, not in the past few centuries. Everyone has something to say about the sociological and cultural reality described variously as the decline of the mainline church, the secularization of American culture, the clear demise of denominational Protestantism, etc., etc., ad infinitum. You did not invite me here to talk about it and there are many more qualified and eloquent to do that job.

Nevertheless, it is our season. Several images give me, if not comfort, at least perspective.

The first is Phyllis Tickles' wonderful image of an every-four-hundred year rummage sale. Unnecessary, out of

date stuff is sold off making space for new stuff. In

, Tickle argues that all the way back to the Exodus and Davidic monarchy and Exile, big things happen in our story in roughly 500-year cycles. Jesus and the early church. Gregory the Great, and East-West split, the Protestant Reformation. After each of these, or most of these at least, particularly closer to us, the East-West schism, and the Reformation, several things happened: a split from the mainstream which is experienced within the mainstream as tragic, perhaps even fatal. And a new institutional form of the original idea – and – a renewed, re-energized and better form of the original institution, and the two more into the future with more integrity and energy and faithfulness. Orthodox Christianity and Roman. Roman and Protestant Christianity.

That helps me. God knows, I lament my denomination's decline. No one has fallen further than the Presbyterians, unless perhaps you, the United Church of Christ. You – Congregationists and we Presbyterians, along with the Episcopalians, used to run the show in Martin Marty's felicitous phrase. From the pre-Revolutionary era right up to my lifetime, the three Protestant denominations dominated the religious landscape in a way that my children and grandchildren and your swill not even be able to imagine.

The Stated Club of the Presbyterian Church was on the cover of Time Magazine. When Eugene Carson Blake and Episcopal Bishop James Pike issued an ecumenical challenge to their churches and the Methodists and the United Church of Christ – it was big news. We built a corporate headquarters in Manhattan, right on Riverside

Drive, just like any major corporation. President Eisenhower, one of ours, helped dedicate it.

I loved it. It was the religious ethos with which I was ordained to ministry.

How far we have fallen. NO, that's really not accurate. How much things have changed. It occurred to me as I watched, with 8 millions other Americans, the first episode of the third season of Downton Abbey last Sunday, as that magical, almost mythical era in British began to crumble and shake and change – it occurred to me that in a way, that mirrors my experience with my Presbyterian church. An era is coming to an end. Our resources in terms of numbers of people and dollars – and how else are we to measure

ourselves? – are maybe 50% of what they were 40 years ago. National staffs have shrunk and no one is seriously predicting that things will turn around in the future. I don't know how it is with the UCC but Presbyterians are willing to invest a lot of energy trying o blame someone. Evangelicals are sure the fault is the progressives. It's the seminaries' fault. Or the out-of-touch .

In saner moments we know that it is no one's fault. The world – American society and culture is changing, has changed from the world the older denominations dominated.

Douglas John Hall, now in his eighties, longe-time Professor of Tehology at Mcgill University and prolific thinker and writer, is helpful in describing what

happened as “disestablishment.” in The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity, Hall proposes that what has happened to us is actually a good thing, that mainline Protestant Christianity has been supported, propped up and virtually sponsored by American and Candaian Custom and sometimes law – every bit of substantially as the older, actually established Churches of Europe. All of that is gone in the face of the racial and religious diversification of the culture, the now socially acceptable and politically viable secularism. It is now OK politically, socially to be a “none” or an agnostic or atheist.

All good. Doug Hall say people who continue to frequent the churches will be doing so for the right reasons.

In a recent book, published last year, Waiting for Gospel: An Appeal to the Dispirited Remnants of Protestant Establishment, Hall returns to that theme.

“The once established churches have been upheld by sociopolitical connections that, though they had little enough to do with the biblical and theological foundations of Christianity were nonetheless strong enough to bolster the ideational, organizational, and economic structures necessary to the Church’s preservation. But those connections no longer pertain – or more accurately, their seeming or partial reality in the still visible Christian sector of our continent are pathetic bulwarks against the secular, pluralistic and frankly, antiquarian tendencies of the present.”

“They cannot prevent the continued decline and decay of denominational religion as we have known it. It is entirely possible (and thinking Christian can no longer avoid the conclusion) that most of the once powerful ecclesiastical institutions of North America will disappear entirely within the near future:

(I think, of course, about that shining corporate building at 475 Riverside Drive housing a large Presbyterian Executive Staff and the staff of the National Council of Churches of Christ which numbered several hundred and I believe, after the most recent restructure and downsizing, numbers 27.)

Hall dismisses resurgent evangelicalism as an attempt to recapture and recreate an even better Christendom in

terms of its class identity, its populism, its alleged rejection of clericalism and ecclesiastical pomp, its aesthetic ordinariness, and its anti-intellectualism.

Hall is actually a very nice , cheerful and jolly even. He was a guest in my home once and we discovered the we all of railroader fathers and grew up in homes defined by railroad time - and the clock. I think sometimes that Hall should not write in Montreal, where it is relentlessly overcast and depressing, but come to Florida and take a walk along the beach, in the sunshine, before he sits down to predict the doom of the Church as we know it.

And yet, he is right, he is right to name what is happening and he is right to suggest that the “gospel

alone can reform the churches," a biblical faith that Hall insists will be a "Thinking Faith," a worldly faith and a faith that proclaims and lives the gospel of incarnational love for the world.

In the final analysis I find Hall encouraging. Something really big is happening in our lifetime. And, as is always the case with really big things, it is difficult to see all of it, and understand all of it and determine what it will look like in the future. I like to remember that the Reformers probably didn't comprehend the totality of the movement they started.

So a new way of being Protestant Christian is coming and it may or may not have a lot to do with the labels under which we have been laboring for these four or five

centuries. In fact, our around its edges even the label “Protestant” is blurred.

Hall attended Union Seminary at an amazing time in that institution’s history and in the history of progressive Christianity in North America. Two of his illustrious classmates are similarly insightful.

Frederick Buechner – who says that maybe the best thing that could